

ALASKA HISTORICAL COMMISSION
Office of History & Archaeology
Alaska Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation
550 West 7th Avenue, Suite 1310
Anchorage, Alaska 99501
Main: 907.269.8721
E-mail: oha@alaska.net

ALASKA'S GEOGRAPHIC NAMES
a program of the
ALASKA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

The Alaska Historical Commission serves as the geographic names board for the State of Alaska. The citizen's board, chaired by the Lt. Governor, reviews names proposed for lakes, streams, mountains, and other physical features in the state. The commission coordinates its program with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. The commission has developed a process to consider proposals, as has the federal board. It takes at least a year to name a geographic feature.

To propose an official name for a geographic feature, the first step is to complete and submit an application. The form is available at <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/oha/designations/geonames.htm> or from the Office of History & Archaeology, 550 West 7th Ave., Suite 1310, Anchorage, AK 99501, 907.269.8721. The complete application and supporting material should be mailed or delivered to the office or sent by email to oha@alaska.net.

GUIDELINES

The Alaska Historical Commission has established the following guidelines which it uses along with the policies of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (Principles, Policies, and Procedures for Domestic Geographic Names). All proposals must identify the type of proposed name from the categories below and address all of the considerations requested.

Local usage

Local usage is the single, best reason to name a geographic feature. Local usage refers to a name for a geographic feature that has evolved over a period of years, is called that name by the community or area as a whole, and is supported by local petitions, oral histories, documents, or other publications. A feature named by the applicant is not considered local usage, even when the applicant has called the feature by that name for a number of years.

The Alaska Historical Commission will consider a proposal if:

- . the application includes published evidence of verbal or written usage of the name, petitions signed by local residents, and resolutions or letters of support from government entities and community groups

Descriptive names (includes features named by applicant)

The Alaska Historical Commission will consider if:

- . the name is relevant and descriptive of the feature
- . the name is not in use elsewhere in the region
- . the name is in good taste and not frivolous
- . the name has been used for a minimum of five years and evidence of the use is provided

Commemorative names (please read the special section)

The Alaska Historical Commission will consider if:

- . the individual has been deceased for five (5) years and evidence of this is provided
- . the individual made a significant, acknowledged contribution over time to Alaska
- . the individual had a direct, long term association with the feature
- . evidence of local support by authorities and residents is provided

Historical names

The Alaska Historical Commission will consider if:

- . the authenticity of the name can be established
- . the name is clearly associated with the area

Native American names

The Alaska Historical Commission will consider if:

- . the name is in common local use and that use is documented
- . the name is linguistically appropriate to the area in which it is to be applied
- . the land owner, if on Native land, supports the proposed name in writing

Name changes

The Alaska Historical Commission will consider if:

- . the current official name is derogatory to a racial, ethnic, gender, or religious

group

- . the current official name is duplicative and causing confusion
- . evidence of extensive local support by authorities and residents is provided

Other

The Alaska Historical Commission will consider if:

- . there is an overriding need to name a feature within a **wilderness area** (for purposes of safety, education, or area administration), and the land manager has been consulted and given the opportunity to comment on the proposed name
- . an existing name is applied to a **related feature**, *i.e.* the name of a mountain is applied to an unnamed glacier that is part of it
- . the name can be **pronounced** without considerable difficulty
- . a spelling that includes **diacritical marks** (special marks not normally found in the English language) has substantial evidence of active local use, such as official records, maps, and signs, in the area where the feature is located

All proposals must be accompanied by a U.S. Geological Survey 1:63,360 or 1:25,000 scale topographical map with the feature to be named clearly identified on the map. The applicant must explain why the feature should be named. Photographs and other identifying aids are useful, but are not required. Evidence of local support, in the form of letters, petitions, and newspaper articles and letters to the editor, showing public awareness and endorsement of the proposed name is encouraged.

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names has a policy to identify a single official name and spelling for each geographic feature. The board may identify a **variant** name if needed for clarity or reference. A variant is any current or historic name or spelling for a geographic feature other than the official name. It may be in parentheses following the approved name.

COMMEMORATIVE NAMES

A commemorative name of a geographic feature is to honor and recognize an individual who has made an outstanding or noteworthy contribution to an area or the state, or is a national or international figure. A commemorative place name is not intended to memorialize a family member or friend.

Proposals containing a given name (first or last) or nickname of an individual are considered commemorative. The full name of a person as part of a geographic name normally is not approved unless surname use alone would be ambiguous.

The person must have been deceased *for at least five (5) years* before the Alaska Historical Commission will consider the proposal. An obituary and biography of the individual must be part of the proposal.

The person should have a *direct association* with the feature, or have made a *significant contribution* to the area in which it is located.

Direct association. The individual should have been physically present at, or in the vicinity of, the feature for several years; engaged in some activity that affected the feature; or spent a great deal of time at or in the vicinity of the feature. A person's death on or at a feature, such as a mountaineering accident or plane crash, or the mere ownership of land or the feature, does not normally meet this criterion. Recreational use of or visits to a feature does not normally meet this criterion.

Significant contribution. The contribution that the individual has made must be notable, of consequence, and have had an impact on the community, region or state. A significant contribution is an extraordinary effort, achievement, or impact. It may come from the individual's work, professional or civic activities, and can be in the social, political, economic, scientific, or cultural areas. The significant contribution should have benefitted Alaskans beyond the individual's immediate circle of family and friends. Generally, these individuals will have been recognized through a letter of thanks from the Governor, certificates of appreciation from an agency or group, awards, newspaper articles featuring the contribution made, dedication of local man-made features (park, street, garden, building), inclusion in *Who's Who*, etc. The individual might be a historical figure.

Features can be named for persons who made a significant contribution nationally or internationally, especially if the contribution was exceptional and unique. In such instances, the requirement of direct association does not need to be met, but the other requirements for commemorative names must be met.

Commemorative name proposals must include evidence of local support by authorities and residents attesting to the individual's association with the feature and significant contribution.

GEOGRAPHIC NAMING PROCESS

Upon receipt of a proposal, staff review it for completeness and, if necessary, request additional information from the applicant. Of particular concern is that adjacent land owners know of the proposal and agree with the proposed name.

Staff prepare a Domestic Geographic Name Report (a U.S. Board on Geographic Names form) and send it with a map and supporting information to relevant Native groups, public land managers, local governments, and other interested parties for comment. For Native names, the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks is consulted. Interested parties might include local historical organizations, pilot associations, and outdoor groups.

The Alaska Historical Commission reviews the proposal and all public comments received and takes formal action to approve or not approve a proposed name. The commission is designated the geographic names board

for the state (Alaska Statute 41.35.350). The commission meets at least two times a year. Commission members reference these guidelines in their formal action. The applicant is notified of the meeting at which the commission will consider their proposed name. Every meeting has a public comment period when an applicant can address commission members. Place names approved by the Alaska Historical Commission are official for the State of Alaska and entered into a database.

Following the meeting, applicants are notified in writing of the Alaska Historical Commission's action on their proposal. The proposal, all comments received, and record of the commission's action are sent to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Staff there also have a review process before the board considers and votes on a proposed name. The USBGN is the final word on choice, spelling, and official use of the place names in the U.S. Its approval makes a name official nationally. This does not guarantee the name will appear on USGS and other federal maps. When a federal map is revised and updated, efforts are made to add the name. The name is entered in the Geographic Name Information System (GNIS), <http://geonames.usgs.gov/domestic/>.

The Alaska Office of History & Archaeology has a program manager for geographic names who can be contacted with questions or for additional information.

[AHC adopted 4.27.2011]

[Updated 6.15.2015]